EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler

How democracy can give students a stake in their school's success

WORLD'S BEST SCHOOL
Community Collaboration

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WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL
PRIZES

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Introduction

EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler is a primary school in Novo Hamburgo, Brazil, and was once a dilapidated institution that saw high numbers of students failing and dropping out. Today, after bringing in democratic assemblies that give students a stake, it has almost no failures. The school tries to create a warm, welcoming culture that encourages inclusivity and places value on its wider community, fostering a deep, familial relationship.

Profile:

Country:
Brazil

Region:
Novo Hamburgo

School type:
Public school

Location area:
City

Student population:
501 to 1000

Prize Category:
Community Collaboration

"The idea was when students would have these assemblies, they would see that the problem was not only to be solved by the principal and school administration but that problems at the school would affect everyone. They would also find a way to resolve the problems that were caused by the students."

– Andrea Zimmer, Principal, EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler

In-depth look

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler has long supported the idea that everyone can learn and that, to ensure that every student can rise to their potential, they need to be involved in a system that encourages collaboration and the sharing of ideals. The school's decision-making process is collective, regardless of the topic of discussion.

At its core, the school endeavours to build an inclusive and democratic school environment where students can pursue academic excellence. Back in 2012, like other schools in the area that serve impoverished communities, EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler was considered a "weak" institution. Back then,

the school had a new building, though it eventually became the focus of student vandalism: the facilities were covered in graffiti and were in such disrepair that many were unusable. There were often eruptions of verbal and physical conflicts in class.

Some teachers even became wary of the students, seeing a lack of willingness to engage in their studies, even harbouring opinions that some students were lazy or apathetic about their education because they were poor. Compounding the school's problems were the high dropout rates and poor academic performance. Ultimately, there was a lack of community spirit: both students and teachers felt as if they didn't belong, and morale overall was low.

At the core of the students' aggression were their feelings of isolation. "They didn't feel that they belonged in this place," said Andrea Zimmer, the school Principal. "It was necessary to make them feel like they belonged, that the school was part of them as well." The school hoped that, by organising assemblies, students would have a platform in which they could take part in shaping the school operations and have a space where they felt valued.

"We have a belief that every single student is able to learn. We always conduct ourselves in a way where no one is left behind – we don't want them to feel like they are not advancing in their studies."

– Joice Maria Lamb, School Coordinator, EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler

EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

The idea of assemblies was based on the democratic educational model, and the pedagogical project was called #learningandshare, based on three core premises: democratic participation, collaborative learning, and interaction among peers.

The school brought in a small Democratic Management Committee, independent of the school's leadership that organised the schedule of the assemblies and explained to the participants about its function. Since then, the assemblies have been happening monthly among three different segments: students within their classes, school staff and legal guardians. Every discussion (ideas, criticism, solutions) is registered in the assemblies' notebooks.

During the parents and school staff assemblies, the issues gathered by the participants are discussed and a solution to these issues is put up at the same time. That being said, at the end of the assembly, the group has already come up with actions to solve the issues or forward these issues to the annual school conference. The procedure for the students' assemblies is a bit different since the people involved are more numerous and from ages ranging from 4 to 15 years old. After the assembly is done by them, the Committee gathers the notebook from all the classes, reads the registered discussions and makes a compilation of the issues put forward in order to discuss them with the representatives. At the meeting with the representatives, a new discussion is brought up about what was presented to the Committee in a way to find solutions to the issues presented. The representatives discuss again with their classes at the next assembly about the actions to the issues they have raised.

This is a circular process of action-reflection-action. If any issue is not met with a solution in this process, students must take it forward to the school Conference for it to be discussed with the entire school.

Over time, the democratic assemblies took a firmer root, starting with teachers and faculty having their own assemblies and then students taking charge of their own assemblies. "All students speak freely," said Joice Maria Lamb, the School Coordinator. "All their demands are heard. It's very important to note that during the conference, everyone has a vote – everyone can speak, and everyone can talk. It's a direct, democratic management."
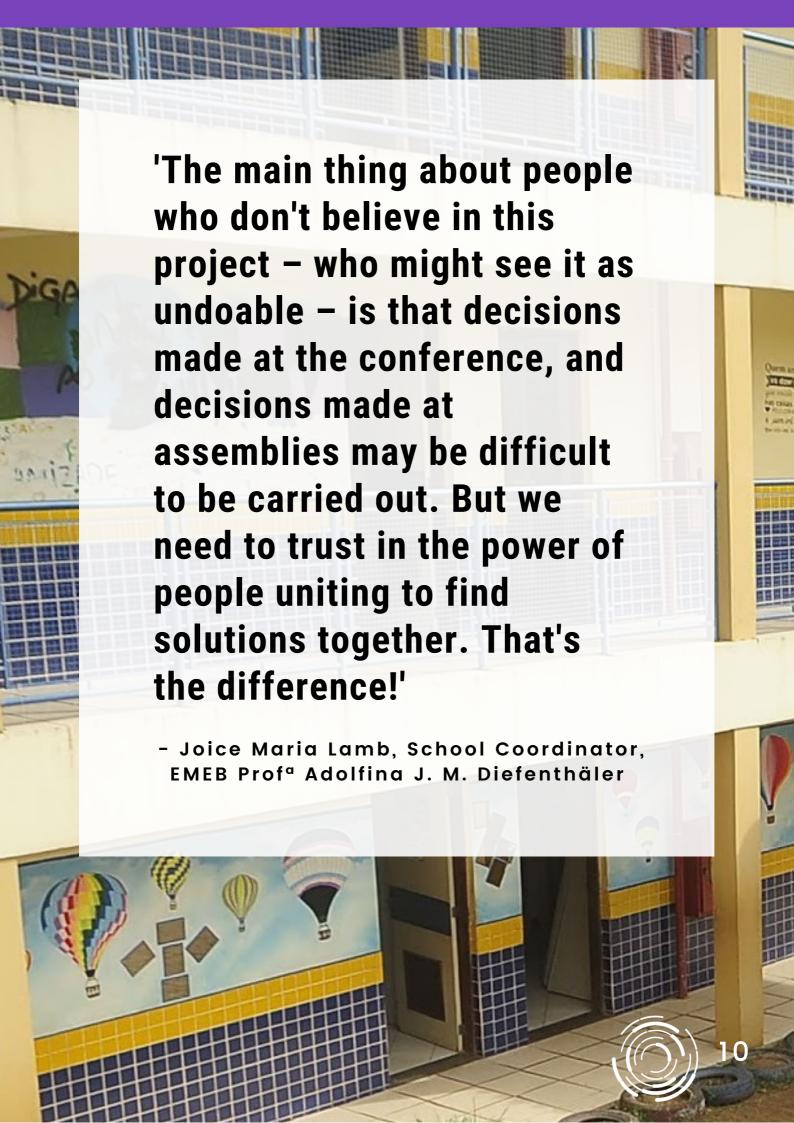
Each year, the school discusses the biggest requests and issues during a school-wide conference, at the end of which everyone – including students – votes to see which of the most viable requests can be achieved in the following year. Since everyone can participate, everyone feels responsible for the school's development and learns to listen to and respect each other's needs.

Requests concerning other groups or that require funding get forwarded to the school conference. There are four general student assemblies before the conference since this is the largest event – all students can propose demands, speak in the assemblies, and vote (from 4 to 14 years old). The official school conference takes place on a Saturday near the end of the year where the requests are presented by the assembly before being discussed and, finally, either approved or rejected.

Each conference participant has one vote and the approved requests make up the Conference Document the school must execute the following year.

The school follows the national curriculum and the suggestions from the assemblies add to the needs of the community its work. This action can be seen with scepticism by the people that believe that the students might suggest unrealistic solutions to the issues. However, at the conference, every demand is put up for debating and seldom does a situation like this occur. It is not up to the school to select the ideas previously because it is through the debate the people tend to learn. "We don't only learn by making correct decisions, we learn from making wrong decisions," said Lamb.

'The main thing about people who don't believe in this project – who might see it as undoable – is that decisions made at the conference, and decisions made at assemblies may be difficult to be carried out. But we need to trust in the power of people uniting to find solutions together. That's the difference!'

– Joice Maria Lamb, School Coordinator, EMEB Profª Adolfina J. M. Diefenthäler

OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The assemblies provided a platform that helped students have a voice and recognise each other as people with the right to express their ideas and concerns. They created a learning environment where students could understand what it meant to work collaboratively.

Teachers and other employees felt valued, not only as curriculum implementers but also as agents with great transformative potential. When following the students' assemblies, teachers were surprised by the responsibility and dedication the students put into their requests. By being called to deliberate and not just to listen, family members felt welcome and understood their responsibility to the school. And by deliberating together at the conference, the participants learned that they could relate between generations, that children are not immature or incapable but are able to have deeper conversations about issues that impact them.

The assemblies also showed students and the wider community that decisions made collectively are much more likely to be right. Ultimately, the experiences gained from the programme allowed the school and other public schools in the area to effectively fulfil their social role, which was to develop the physical, cognitive, and affective potentialities of students, enabling them to become citizens who participate in and transform the society in which they live.

The assemblies also saw an increase in the school's academic standing: in 2010 the school had a 6% failure rate for students in the earlier grades and 12.4% for students in the higher grades. By 2019, only four children out of 654 elementary school children failed, 0.3% in the early years, and 0.9% in the final year. This proved that, by better catering to the student's needs, the democratic assemblies helped overcome the challenge of student disengagement.

Key Steps

ANALYSING THE SCHOOL'S ENVIRONMENT

The first step was to analyse the school's rates (pass, failure, age/grade distortion) and overall environment. Faculty also compared this school with other schools in the local area to see whether there were similar problems. After that, the school created proposals for teacher assemblies, which would act as a blueprint for teachers to understand how the programme would be conducted before applying the concept to students.

DEMOCRATIC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The school then set up a Democratic Management Committee to organise the assembly and conference requirements, such as record keeping, schedules, and timelines. It was important to set up the assemblies as a forum that would allow for all

participants to take part, where participants would set the agenda, using either a previous list of topics or setting it at the time of the assembly, and then voting on proposals.

RUNNING THE ASSEMBLIES

It was important that the assemblies be carried out by the participants themselves. The teachers initially helped students understand how to set up their own assembly and then left the forums to them.

The assembly is a deliberative space among equals – where students were not yet able to write, older students sometimes joined to help. Another important aspect of the assemblies was consistency, meaning that they occur regularly – in Adolfina's case, this is monthly. The regular assemblies did away with the need for single, large gatherings whenever problems arose, and instead allowed the school to focus on building platforms where everyone involved had a frequent voice, without being centred on single issues that impacted only a small group of students.

FEEDBACK ON ASSEMBLIES

Not all assemblies can solve all problems. Because of this, the school allowed participants to forward unresolved issues to school management. It was important that the participants include how they wanted the issue to be resolved and the group's expectations in the response.

After each assembly, there is a meeting between class representatives and the school management. This meeting covers each class's requests, especially where the student assemblies couldn't find any solutions. These meeting notes are then sent to the end-of-year Conference. The financial requests always get sent to the Conference, as it is too difficult for any one group to decide how to spend the school's limited resources.

ESTABLISHING THE SCHOOL END-OF-YEAR CONFERENCE

At the end-of-year Conference, all school and community members come together to discuss. Participation is voluntary and there are no elected delegates for each member group.

Some years see a large number of participants and require several debate rooms. Afterwards, when the conference document has been approved, the decisions are added to that year's manifesto and must be executed the following year.

DEVELOPMENT COMMISSIONS

At the end-of-year conference, a commission is selected to deal with the more involved and/or complex issues. For instance, a Financial Management Commission was created in 2013, when delegates felt there was a lack of transparency around financial management. A Sustainability Commission was created in 2015.

The participants of a select commission study the theme, create action plans, and implement the projects, working closely with other students in their classes and in their extracurricular activities. When the commissions encounter problems, they can raise the issue in the monthly assemblies or at the conference itself.

EVALUATIONS

The assemblies act as a form of evaluation for the school because they feed back into each other with the issues that were not satisfactorily resolved. However, the school felt it was necessary to promote annual institutional evaluations too, in order to measure the delegates' levels of satisfaction and to help flag any issues that may have been missed during the assemblies. The results of the evaluations are then widely disseminated.

RECORD KEEPING

Keeping adequate records of the entire democratic management process is important to ensure the programme works for the next generation of delegates – i.e. the new influx of students and teachers. Each committee writes a document that serves as a guide for other future committees. The School-Conference document, for example, is published on the school's website, and published in the school agenda that each student receives at the beginning of the year.

Advice and Guidance

It's important for schools to try out the agreed decisions or requests so that the school's faculty can understand what worked and what didn't, and evaluate which practices are the most effective. Communication is also key when implementing the programme, with all stakeholders being informed about the process and how it will ultimately benefit the wider community. What will allow the project to work is trust that the process will lead to better academic outcomes and healthier self-esteem for students and teachers.

More information

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- **f** **Escola Adolfina Diefenthäler**
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